

Statement of Mr. Chad Burns,
National Transportation Safety Board's
Public Forum on Motorcycle Safety
September 12-13, 2006

Mr. Thomas Chadwick Burns is the manager of the Motorcycle Safety Program at the Georgia Department of Driver Services, and currently serves as the Vice-Chairperson of the State Motorcycle Safety Association (SMSA). He is certified as a Motorcycle Safety Foundation (MSF) Instructor/RiderCoach, MSF RiderCoach Trainer, and examiner training specialist. He was also the MSF Chief Instructor Trainer from 1986 until 1999. Mr. Burns is a Life Member of the American Motorcyclist Association and a charter member of the National Motorcycle Safety Fund. He holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Tennessee in Education. He is also a Vietnam veteran who served honorably in the Air Force from 1967 until 1971.

Although the number of motorcycle rider fatalities in single and multi-vehicle crashes has increased over the past ten-year period, the proportion of motorcycle rider fatalities in single-vehicle to multi-vehicle crashes does not indicate any significant variation according to the June 2006 "Recent Trends in Fatal Motorcycle Crashes – An Update" by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. In the absence of any data to the contrary, the leading cause of multi-vehicle motorcycle crashes primarily remains the fault of motorists, usually violating the right-of-way of the motorcyclist, usually at intersections and usually turning left in front of the motorcycle rider. The visibility or conspicuity of the motorcycle rider remains part of the problem in these types of crash scenarios since motorists most often indicate "not seeing" the motorcycle or "not seeing" the motorcycle in sufficient time to avoid the crash.

So, we continue to struggle with getting all roadway users to look for and respond positively to each other. Mutual consideration and respect seems to be an ongoing societal problem that has many implications directly applicable to highway safety. Some of the solutions to continuing crash reduction may well rest with behavioral scientists including sociologists, psychologists and the like.

No doubt, public education and awareness programs play a major role in significantly reducing multi-vehicle motorcycle crashes. Sharing the roadway campaigns have long been the focus of many different highway user groups including bicyclists, pedestrians and motorcyclists. These campaigns have taken

many different forms and have included many different media outlets including print media, television and radio. In addition to public service announcements, programs have been initiated that include various promotional items including patches, pins, brochures, decals, bumper stickers, billboards, posters, ink pens, cups, mugs, coasters, key fobs, hang tags and other “novelty-like” items to encourage motorists to “look for motorcyclists.”

Historically, most states have strictly limited budgets, at best, to conduct motorist awareness and public information campaigns. Consequently, states often “share” their materials as well as rely on other organizations to provide materials they can use. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the Motorcycle Safety Foundation and the American Motorcyclist Association all have developed and provided states with a variety of motorist awareness and public information materials over the years.

Most motorist awareness programs are focused in the spring of each year. Since that is the beginning of the motorcycle riding season in many states, the

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month of May has generally been accepted and adopted as the beginning of a national “*Motorcycle Awareness and You*” campaign. The campaigns have included a variety of media outlets such as billboards, television and radio PSAs as well as special events. Special events have included organized motorcycle rides, automobile windshield washing at interstate rest stops, proclamation signings, etc. Many of the events have included celebrities or high-ranking government officials in an attempt to attract media attention and coverage. Year-round efforts may well be productive and necessary to be effective but due to limited budgets a one-time-a-year campaign has been the norm.

Equally important has been the encouragement of motorcyclists to be “better seen” in the traffic mix. Dressing in bright clothing and helmets, wearing retro-reflective material, riding with headlights on at all times as well as using a headlight modulator. Bright motorcycle colors may even contribute to riders being easier seen by other highway users. In addition, motorcyclists have been trained to make use of all their lane space in order to be easier and more quickly detected by the motoring public. Ride “where you can be easier seen and see

others” has long been the mantra in rider education and training. Don’t ride in motorists’ “blind spots” and use extra caution when approaching intersections. Discussion of intersections, in particular, has carried extra warnings and precautions such as always slowing and keeping both the clutch and brakes covered in order to reduce the motorcyclists’ reaction time. Expect the unexpected and ride as if you were invisible is often heard in training classes and been part of public information campaigns.

State programs have also engaged in a variety of other motorcyclist public information and education efforts. Those efforts have included but not limited to themes such as wearing of all the proper riding gear, wearing helmets, not drinking and riding (ride straight), taking a training class and getting properly licensed. Crash data repeatedly indicates all of these are significant problems in the motorcycling community.

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Motorists’ awareness programs have been extended to most state licensing efforts. “Sharing the Roadway” supplements are included in many of the state Driver’s Manuals encouraging motorists to look for motorcyclists as well as attempting to inform motorists about the unique operational aspects of motorcycles. Most recently, the NHTSA has provided model language for the Sharing the Roadway supplement. Some state programs have even included questions on the drivers’ written examination addressing specific motorcycle operation that was included in the Sharing the Roadway supplement.

Research is still needed to assist in determining the cause of multi-vehicle crashes. We know that most of us are poor judges of speed and distance, especially when the profile of the vehicle is dramatically reduced as is the case with motorcycle detection. “Humanizing” the motorcyclist also seems to be important since many often see only the vehicle and not the person. Many past campaigns have attempted to address that problem with bumper stickers and billboard campaigns focusing on the human element and stressing the point that

“my brother rides, my sister rides, my Dad rides, my Mom rides, your neighbor rides, etc.”

Many non-motorcyclists often over-estimate the ability of the motorcyclist and/or the capability of the motorcycle assuming the rider can stop in shorter distances than actually possible or underestimating the actual speed of the motorcycle. Motorcyclists also contribute to the problem by exceeding the speed limit and riding “over their heads” (above their abilities and/or the motorcycles’ capabilities). As a matter of fact, many multiple-vehicle motorcycle crashes could be avoided if the rider was prepared and/or more skilled in the two critical crash avoidance maneuvers of braking and swerving. Of course, this means much more work needs to be done in ensuring motorcycle riders are trained and possess the necessary crash avoidance skills.

There continues to be an increase in driver and rider distractions. Technology has provided many in-vehicle devices that too easily distract operators from the driving and riding task. Global positioning systems, satellite radio, cell phones and other electronic devices are readily available and often

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installed as factory equipment in motor vehicles (WiFi, Bluetooth, etc.). This technology is now making its way to motorcycles so that motorcycle operators, too, can be distracted from the riding task.

Of course, there remain many inappropriate driver activities in which operators engage such as eating, reading, shaving, smoking, applying make-up, etc. Even conversing with passengers can have disastrous results if operators are distracted from the driving task. Other inappropriate activities continue to plague the motoring and motorcycle community such as driving impaired, violating fundamental traffic laws and a myriad of other dangerous and reckless behaviors.

With the increased volume of traffic, we have also witnessed new driver/rider behavior including road rage. This type of behavior is probably a result and combination of life’s personal “pressures,” the particular traffic

situation and certain personality traits that result in us witnessing aggressive and inappropriate operator driving responses which can often have tragic results.

Another recent development is the increase in motorcycle “stunt” riding on the public streets and highways. Many local jurisdictions are now indicating this is becoming more and more of a problem. Many jurisdictions are also reporting problems with “pocket bikes” or mini bikes that are being ridden on public streets. In most areas, these “mini-motorcycles” are not street legal. Some state programs are already being called upon to assist in addressing these particular issues.

There are many “unknowns” that need additional study and research. How has the change in the traffic mix effected crash causation over the past two decades? Has the design of new vehicles contributed to crash causation? Has the intent of the motorcycle “headlight-on” requirement been negated by the use of daytime running lights on automobiles and other vehicles? Why hasn’t modulating headlights become standard equipment on motorcycles?

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We are hoping the answers to some of these questions are provided as a result of the recently announced motorcycle crash study that will be conducted by the Oklahoma Transportation Center over the next few years. With minimal motorcycle crash research being conducted since the completion of the Hurt Study almost thirty years ago, we definitely need updated crash research data and findings.

The solution to reducing multi-vehicle motorcycle crashes may provide some answers for the overall motor vehicle crash reduction problem. We need to explore and make better use of the new communication technology that is becoming available daily to us in educating all roadway users. The information age is “here and now” and we must continue to progress and expand using all of the tools available to us. Partnering and working together is more important now than ever since we are forced to share our limited roadway space.

Intelligent transportation systems, intelligent enforcement systems, innovative highway design and construction, improved traffic engineering, cooperative vehicle-infrastructure systems, road weather response technology, behavioral sciences, mass transit, education and training communities, emergency and hospital services and the motorcycle industry must do a better job of partnering and working together. Sharing successes and learning from failures is a must.

We need to engage in more “global thinking” in order to maintain and increase our mobility. Insisting we share the roadway and educating all roadway users on the importance of sharing the roadway is critical. Targeted, effective educational and informational messages will be required if we are to impact the crash statistics. Repeated, long-term efforts can be effective and expected as we work towards reducing the motorcycle crash, injury and fatality numbers. Experimentation and new programs need to be funded and implemented.

We are excited to see the recent interest and emphasis the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has in motorcycle safety and, perhaps
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more importantly, their making funds available to assist state programs towards expanding their rider education and training efforts as well as their licensing, awareness and information programs. We hope this increased emphasis and attention allows more partnering with various highway and traffic safety organizations and groups on both a local and national level.